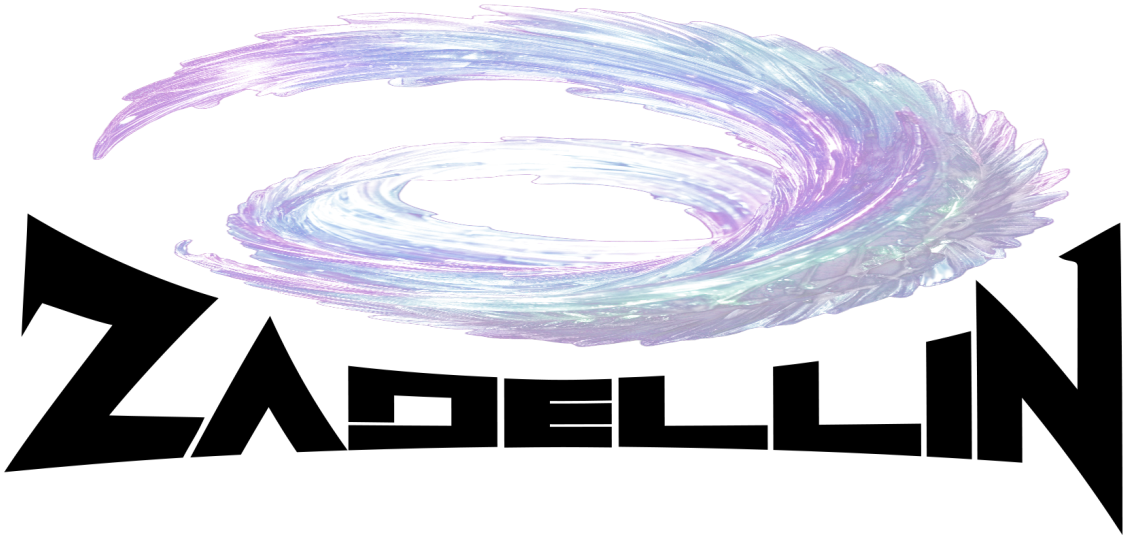

With Love and Rage,

By Theta Mandel

Edited by Ostara Gale & Aristide Twain

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"Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."
— Arthur C. Clarke

* * *

"No civilisation would ever have been possible without a framework of stability, to provide the wherein for the flux of change. Foremost among the stabilising factors, more enduring than customs, manners and traditions, are the legal systems that regulate our life in the world and our daily affairs with each other."

— Hannah Arendt

This quote from an ancestor of ours nearly one thousand years ago still resonates today — a once-robust legal system now in tatters at our feet, the rags held above us as if they were still a whole, in-tact framework that means a damn thing. Our overreliance on our traditions and our history as evidence of our advancement has only served to mask the truth: our city is fulfilling its nominatively deterministic prophecy. Atlantis is falling.

And yet, there is still hope. We can let it fall, the rising waves washing our civilisation away, or we can fight back. The only way this can come about is as a result of radical change — to save our world, we must take the leap, and destroy this warped, twisted mirror of the old. Reject the Federation, and rebuild. No kings, no empire — only we the people can bring justice.

Hand in hand, may Atlantis rise once more.

With Love and Rage,

The Blue Paper Routers

* * *

"When a crash landing left our crew separated on a world that was disappearing around us, I feared the worst. Although we tried our best to find each other ourselves, ultimately, it was only through the sacrifice of another that Zerlan was able to return to our timeship, the *Zadellin*, safe and sound. The willing sacrifice of a droid positioned in a warehouse linked to that little nonexistent asteroid, looking after treasures collected by someone long gone;

a quiet, lonely soul who found Zerlan by chance. D.I.P.O.D., in its last moments, was able to find solace and companionship. It returned Zerlan to us. And so, while we did not know D.I.P.O.D. for very long, it touched our lives, and we honour it today with this service," Mrellin finished, raising her head from the piece of paper in her hands.

Nardeth thought the whole thing was a little silly, but it seemed to soothe Zerlan, who wiped away a tear.

"Now, if anyone would like to say anything, it is your time to speak."

Zerlan took a step towards the middle of their little circle, sniffing.

"Thank you for being a friend when I needed one," ze said.

Then ze leaned down, whispering into the flower Mrellin had helped zir plant into the hillside. It was a hardy little thing, with a thick purple stem; sturdy, just like Zerlan's lost friend.

"You were beautiful," ze said, and then moved away.

The trio stood in silence for a few moments, before Zerlan turned to Nardeth expectantly. Nardeth stayed, resolutely, unmoving.

Mrellin glared.

She hadn't been much of a glarer, back at the Watch, but her time acting as their *de facto* captain seemed to have instilled within her something very glare-y. She exuded authority — as was her right, Nardeth figured, what with her being the only truly competent member of their strange little runaway trio. So, however begrudgingly, Nardeth gave in.

"Uh, ahem, well. I am sorry I never got to meet you, D.I.P.O.D.." Nardeth ran their tongue along their teeth to form each letter as they spoke, despite not pronouncing them separately. "I am glad you were there to help Zerlan get back home."

They turned, desperation colouring their face, to Mrellin. She nodded, as if giving permission, and they stepped back, relieved.

The three Lightbringers gathered their things — Zerlan had insisted on darker, subdued colours, as apparently that was 'how most of the universe's peoples remembered their dead', leading Nardeth to don a felt jacket with a great, black collar over a ribbed, dark green shirt. Mrellin was wrapped in a deep blue coat that reached down to her ankles, while Zerlan had scrounged up a plasticky, see-through hooded poncho to drape over zir grey shirt, to protect against the biting chill.

Thus attired, the trio slowly made their way down the slope and around the curve, until they were facing away from where they'd left their beloved timeship, that vehicle of their escape which had spirited them away from their old lives and towards… well, that remained to be seen. What mattered most is that they were *away*.

"That was a lovely service, Mrellin," Zerlan began, sliding zir legs lithely through the wavering violet grass. "Mind you," ze added after a moment, "it wasn't entirely necessary. Dippy's… not dead. Hopefully. Probably. Just, you know, lost for a bit."

Mrellin and Nardeth exchanged A Look behind Zerlan's back. They needn't bother with those kinds of Looks; they'd spent enough time covering for each other over the years that they knew what the other was thinking, quite without meaning to. Theirs was the relationship of two people who had been coworkers in the same stuffy, unbearable environment for too long. They didn't just know the other's struggles and high points; they complemented each other. Like two cogs that had left their machine but had never stopped *fitting*.

Wordless understanding achieved, Nardeth slid into the conversational gap.

"Still," they said in a sympathetic voice, "we *are* unlikely to see D.I.P.O.D. again. That's why we thought it would be worth… saying goodbye. That's all a service is for, in the end. Isn't it?"

Mrellin scoffed quietly at the 'we'; the service had been her idea, and hers alone. But Nardeth's words seemed to have had the desired effect. Zerlan said nothing, but ze nodded, and ze seemed more at peace with the implications of what the three had just done as they continued to pick their way down the

mountain, Nardeth carrying the staff Mrellin had found for them at their last stop.

Nardeth seemed to be a little freer with their movements, as if it took up less of their concentration, which was a relief. Mrellin hoped this meant they would be able to make it to their destination without too many stops — she'd been very pleased when Nardeth had found this place and suggested a holiday to take their minds off all the fear and running-for-their-lives.

She'd been especially optimistic after realising why Nardeth had chosen this of all places — a planet known for their melding of natural sciences, of technology, and of what was only ever known as 'magic'. It was a perfect pick for Zerlan, who was interested in all things technological, and could often be found tinkering with their Ship, engaged in animated conversation met only by beeps and whirs. Mrellin quietly thought he needed this break more than any of them, having finally made his first friend since leaving the Watch's employ, only to lose that friendship just as quickly. Nardeth and Mrellin had each other; Zerlan only had his machines, and his enthusiasm for learning about the universe around him.

The older travellers didn't always understand Zerlan, but Mrellin was hopeful that they were finally starting to figure out how to support zir. It was with this hope that they had arrived on the ocean jewel of the Astrian Spiral Galaxy — to admire the magic. Tourism was abundant, fascinated aliens trickling in from all over to marvel at the beautiful architecture, the transforming population, and of course the main attraction of their scientific progress. Word was, the self-sufficient Central City acted as a museum, with the very ground a mosaic of tiles wrought from natural materials and processes, as if the whole city was a single building.

Before long, the trio had wound their way down to the path that acted as a flat bridge between where they'd parked the *Zadellin*, and the central city. A little ways in the distance stood a cluster of towering spires, bleached by the sun and glittering amongst the midday heat. Cerulean blue waves lapped against the wrought-aurichalcum borders of the city, raised against the vast ocean — an artificial coastline, constructed from the very same metal as the ship that had brought the colonists to this world. Waste not, want not — the people of this world carefully reused any and every material.

"I read about this," Zerlan was telling his friends, bursting with excitement, "and how, in theory, this should mean everything non-decomposable that came with them in the *Gela* is still around — that was the name of their ship, *The Gela*. They'll have been incorporated into the new City. Everything else within is meant to be entirely natural — sustainably harvested from the environment in a way that fosters harmony and connection with the ecology of the planet. This may be the closest humanity ever comes to a true Utopia."

Claims of utopia were easy to believe in such a magnificent place as this. Even for Lightbringers like *Zadellin* crew, brought up far above the wonders of the wider universe in favour of the restrained excellence of the Morning Star, the majesty of such a place was undeniable — it was like something out of a storybook. From afar, it looked like those same books were soaring through the city, flashes of blue scattered towards the ground from some rooftop. The picture-perfect landscape stretched across the horizon, until an unsightly patch about halfway between themselves and the city.

Mrellin couldn't quite suppress a shudder — she had been raised surrounded by perfection, and had come to expect the same in the world around her, despite everything she had seen and felt that contradicted this expectation. A harsh blot against the gentle watercolour; a scrapyard, maybe, contrasting against the city behind it with its random jumble of bold, uncoordinated colours. It was unnerving. One never expected a trash can in paradise. She angled away with her back to the junkyard, so the view was no longer being ruined, and then spread her arms wide. The others stopped behind her, admiring the picturesque scene before them.

"Well, here we are," Mrellin announced. "Welcome to Atlantis."

* * *

High on the ridge where the runaway trio had held their remembrance ceremony less than half an hour prior stood two imposing figures, their standard-issue grey robes fluttering in the gentle breeze, surveying the beauty of the world below. They were watching. More than that, they were Watchers — their nature, their function, and their current purpose.

"Urizen, what a dump," said the taller Watcher, lowering his telescope. "The city down there's so, so —" He waved his hand in a dismissive circle. "*Shiny*."

His companion's hands slipped down from where they had been resting on kos hips, but kos gaze remained fixed on the city in the distance. "It's nothing like home."

Correhnon spoke as if ko agreed with kos partner, but there was something about kos manner, some subtle gleam in kos eyes that gave kom away. Ko was *excited*.

Home was unchanging — eternal. Which was another way of saying that home was boring, all rules-rules-rules and strict, assigned interpretations of reality. But Correhnon was *different*. Ko'd always felt it, deep in the threads of kos being; after the Cosmic War, the Lightbringers were desperate to look backwards, find some comfort in the glory days of their society, but to Correhnon, the future was far more exciting. Ko had done everything possible to distinguish komself from kos peers — kos clothes, kos hair, even kos pronouns, in the hopes that society would understand that ko didn't want to be there. Wouldn't ask kom to stay and safeguard the homeland.

Not quite a resounding success.

And somehow, here ko was. Kos attempts to explore the possibilities of the universe beyond kos native Morning Star had brought kom here, to a fascinatingly *other* kind of place… not to explore, but to hunt down people who were just searching for the same kind of excitement as kom. The irony was not lost on Correhnon. In fact, it made kom miserable.

But, what could ko do, especially with an overzealous partner by kos side who was determined to carry out the job? Ko wanted freedom, but Draven? Who knew what Draven was really after. So, Correhnon begrudgingly played along, nodding as Draven launched into a speech about how the society below must be barbaric, but inside, ko thought the city was beautiful.

"Damnit," Draven swore abruptly. "They're out of sight now — we'd better follow them. Come on."

Just like that, Draven turned towards the slope and started walking, Correhnon close behind. Ko heard a soft crunch and felt something beneath kos boot — bending down to examine the obstruction, ko found it was a flower, with a thick purple stem topped with green thistles. Ko sighed, stepping carefully away from the plant. Draven, sensing kos hesitation, called back —

"What's taking so long?" He strode back over to where his partner was looking sadly down at the streak of purple, now bent over at a right angle.

"Nothing, Draven." Correhnon made to move, but was stopped by a firm hand on kos shoulder.

"We aren't here to smell the flowers," kos partner reminded kom sternly. He reached out with his foot and kicked the flower, ending its ephemeral life. "We have criminals to catch."

Finally, Draven turned around, leading his fellow Watcher down the mountainside.

* * *

Up close, the city was almost grimy, the walls cracked and worn. Sun damage, probably, combined with a lack of care that surprised Zerlan.

"The Jeweled City of Wonders," he remarked, "doesn't seem to be shining as much as it ought to. Uhm…"

He stopped and looked, puzzled, at the towering shape of the city's arched entrance. The others looked at Zerlan askance until he spoke again.

"I didn't think they kept people *out,*" he said with an apologetic shrug.

Sure enough, heavy gates sat cracked open inside the arch, guarded by several large, hulking figures in uniform. Their skin glistened as if sprinkled with water droplets, and they had coral-shaped growths on the tops of their heads like cat-ears, but otherwise looked not dissimilar from humans.

"I wasn't expecting this… Without proper preparation, it's not a good idea to take our chances. We'd better sneak through."

At Mrellin's instructions, the Lightbringers sprang into action, Nardeth pushing the guards' interest away from the trio while Zerlan tried to subtly direct their attention elsewhere, guiding and tugging their minds into position. Mrellin kept the other two stable and focused, a thick cable running between them, the insulation around the connection between their minds. In this way, they were able to keep the guards from taking notice of their little party as they made their way into the fabled city.

"For all my sins, I never thought I'd be literally gatekept from utopia," Nardeth remarked once they were through.

Zerlan frowned. "My research suggested that the people of this world should be accommodating and open to visitors. Tourists are considered especially valuable here — or they began to be, once the society started thinking about value, at any rate. Some time into their second age — you don't think it's possible that we came too early, do you?" Zerlan bit zir lip anxiously.

The three Lightbringers looked around them — it certainly *looked* like a well-developed city. Light stone arches soared above their heads, supported with metal lattice work that appeared more decorative than functional. Appearances were deceiving. Nothing was done without a purpose here — or at least, that was how it should be. The ground under their feet was paved smooth, like stone you might find on a kitchen floor, inlaid with small metal circles.

Nardeth kneeled down to inspect one close to their foot — it had a word that looked like a name running curved along one side, two dates on the other, and a star in the middle. They stood back up and looked at the sky — or rather, the ceiling, as the structure above resembled something like a raised roof, twisting and morphing into different materials and shapes. Almost as if the entire city was indeed a single building, but with space given over to be uncovered too, with no transition from outside to in.

Something here was wrong. There was a prickle on the back of their proverbial neck, making them feel on edge; they turned to Mrellin, who was frowning.

"Something's wrong here," they stated, and their captain nodded.

"I think you're right. It's so… empty. Zerlan, wasn't this meant to be a tourist spot?"

Ze shrugged. "Maybe we're in the off season? Come on, let's explore — maybe we can find someone to show us to the museum area."

As they walked, Nardeth couldn't shake the feeling that this wasn't what they'd come for. The few glimpses of people that they saw were shifty-eyed and nervous, staring at the newcomers a little too long before returning to whatever they'd been working on, and they looked, well.

They all looked like they were supposed to be there.

Tanned skin in various shades, from slightly redder tones to blues and greens, all with various aquatic modifications. The sheen of a translucent, gelatinous skin covering decorated everyone they saw, with many possessing some sort of antenna on their heads, and a few even seemed to have gills. But not once did Nardeth see someone who looked like them, who had fur, feathers — nothing to signify they came from somewhere outside the planet, had evolved somewhere with a drier atmosphere. No aliens. No tourists at all.

Are you sure we're allowed to be here? they wanted to say, but felt that even voicing their concerns would only garner more unwanted attention. Zerlan at least seemed unperturbed, bouncing between various objects with fascination, though Nardeth thought they might just be hiding their discomfort well. They could never tell with Zerlan. Or with anyone who wasn't Mrellin, if they were being honest with themself.

Zerlan caught sight of a local standing by a tall machine that glowed faintly. Their skin was yellow and they had a dark jacket over a dull grey jumpsuit, out of which they pulled a token of some sort, which they slotted into the machine. There was a rattling noise and, a few seconds later, a nutrition bar dropped out of a gap near the bottom. Zerlan moved towards them.

"Hi! I'm not from around here, and I was just wondering if you — uh," ze stopped at the blank expression ze received. "Do you not speak Galactic Standard? I thought everyone around here… right, okay."

Ze cleared zir mind, focusing on the person standing before zir, on what they were expecting to hear. Crossing zir fingers and hoping the work ze did on *Zadellin*'s telepathic circuits would pay off, ze tried again.

"I was wondering if you could point me to the museum area? Or, anywhere that I can see your city's technology in action — doesn't have to be what's on display!" Zerlan sighed in relief when zir words seemed to be understood, though zir face quickly fell at the response.

"Sorry, I need to get back to work."

They rushed off, food bar in hand, leaving Zerlan to turn sadly back to the machine.

"So, what wonders do you contain, eh?"

Ze spoke more to the air than to zir crewmates as ze pressed a large button in the centre of the machine.

"Zerlan," Mrellin called out, "don't go around pressing any buttons you — oh, it's too late, isn't it?"

Indeed, light expanded from the point where Zerlan had pressed down. Within seconds, the light had taken over the front of the machine, and a green-skinned man with two coral-like antennae and a sweeping robe appeared on the screen, smiling.

"Iron Golem Inventions is proud to present the Genie 5000, a new innovation in dispenser technology! Honour your ancestors with the Genie that works for you. With five unique flavours, our patented product will deliver the bar you most desire, understanding your wishes without you needing to spell them out! Because at Iron Golem, we care." Suddenly, an automated voice broke the smooth tones of the man speaking, interrupting to say: "Insert seven credits to receive your meal, or watch an advert for a discount down to four credits. Insert now." The slot the other figure had pushed their tokens into lit up red. Zerlan sighed.

"Money, in exchange for food? In an enlightened society? Maybe we really *are* too early." Zerlan turned and sat on the smooth floor glumly. Nardeth quickly followed. "So much for utopia."

Seeing her compatriots' disappointment, Mrellin jumped into action.

"Come on, don't give up yet! I bet this place is full of all sorts of nascent evidence of what it will become. Let's see if we can translate some city signs, find somewhere interesting."

Reluctantly, Zerlan and Nardeth stood back up, following her as she took them to a nearby sign.

Nardeth squinted at the words, mouthing out sounds until they resolved into some meaning. Even telepathically tapping into *Zadellin*'s own banks of knowledge, it took some doing.

"I think this is… workplace? Workhouse? Something like that. And, the one next to it, pointing to the right, that says… information? No, uh… tourism." They turned back to the others. "So, what do you want to do?"

"It can't hurt to try that last one, right?" Mrellin supplied. "May as well see what they have to offer."

"This could be the very start of tourism in the city! We could be experiencing the start of a glorious new age for them, the beginnings of prosperity and enlightenment," Nardeth added.

Zerlan shrugged, but looked a little more hopeful as the trio made their way through the smooth streets and behind a huge twisted sculpture, shaped like a curled leaf. On the other side, welded onto the sculpture, sat a desk, above which hung a sign which they were pretty sure read 'Tourism Office'. Beneath that sign sat an Atlantean with long, dark hair hanging neatly down her back, eyes bearing downwards to something beneath her desk.

"Hello! Is this the tourism office?" Mrellin called.

The Atlantean jumped, standing upright quickly. Nardeth noticed a glowing watch on her wrist, but no other signs of computers in the area.

"Uh, yes. I'm Aylin, the information assistant. Do you need some information?"

Mrellin walked up to the desk, leaning on it as she looked around, noting the empty desks scattered nearby similar to Aylin's. "Yes — we came to visit

Balop-3, also known as Atlantis, because we'd heard about how your technology is in such perfect harmony with what we've heard called magic, and wanted to see it for ourselves. But, we don't know where to start — where would you recommend we visit in your fine city?"

She flashed her best sweet-lost-girl smile, and Aylin extracted herself from the desk, coming to stand in front of the crew.

"Well, we don't get many visitors these days, so, we don't have many spaces carved out for you, but…" She smiled, though her voice was flat. "I'd be happy to take you on a tour. Follow me."

The three Lightbringers shared a look, and did as they were bid.

* * *

As Aylin walked, she pointed out various structures, explaining when they were built, and for what purpose. Nardeth quickly noticed that almost nothing had retained its original use — that market dome was now for metalworkers, this post office was now a monitoring hub.

A surveillance society, Nardeth thought as they looked up at the cameras, but they did all their surveilling out in the open. Everything was — well, almost everything. Their guide did point out an enclosed space nearer the centre of the city, the first truly private area they'd seen, as the office of an advisor to a King. There were giant nets scattered around the city, stretched between pillars and dangling from the ceiling, but none near the centre.

"Many years ago, in more disordered times," the guide related, "our people used to sleep wherever there was room. It was King Mestor who introduced the concept of 'appropriate spaces'. Now, the Swings — these net-like structures you see here — have been introduced as *the* appropriate place for sleeping. But don't worry," the guide added in that unnervingly flat parody of a chipper tone, "there's always a place to rest close at hand. *Most* workplaces provide Swings for their workers."

The Atlanteans' language rang strangely in the Lightbringers' ears, for all they understood it; their ship had learned to speak it, but they themselves never had. Linguistic learning programs at the Celestial Academies had been

pared down after the Cosmic War, particularly idiosyncratic posthuman tongues like this one, only spoken in single words. So it was a strange experience; all the words were unfamiliar, yet, thanks to their connection to the *Zadellin*, they grasped the meaning.

Perhaps that was the whole of why the guide's spiel sounded so odd, so uncanny.

Perhaps.

"So, what kind of work is done in a place like this?" Zerlan asked, hoping Aylin would provide some hint of what they came there to see, but was soon disappointed.

"Take a look for yourself," she said, gesturing to a nearby dome with partial walls. They seemed to be made from something like glass, though they weren't fully transparent; the crew had to look for a point where the substance became so, allowing them to see behind the wall.

Inside, hundreds of Atlanteans were perched on benches, bent over as they silently worked on things that looked something like mixing bowls; they poured substances in, stirred and sifted through the dough, and out of the bottom pulled garments, mostly in dark colours.

"I'll probably end up somewhere like this," their guide muttered. Mrellin turned to face her.

"What do you mean? Do you not like your current job?"

"I do, but, tourism has been declining steadily since King Ampheres's border restrictions, after the second disaster. He decreed that foreign influence must be kept out, and began closing many of the offices that facilitated the movement of aliens in and out of our city, and our wider world. Even our own colonies, ruled by other Kings in other Cities across our world, were soon considered more foe than ally."

Worried, she glanced down at her wrist, the watch pulsing orange.

"But of course, this was for the best," she added quickly. "As is, I'm sure, the closure of the Tourism Office, which renders me redundant. Today's my last day."

She breathed a sigh of relief as her watch changed to a calmer white.

Zerlan, noticing the action, spoke up.

"Can I ask, the watch —"

He stopped dead at a subtle sign from Mrellin, the merest shaking of her head.

"Uhm, could you tell us a little more about the history of your world?" Nardeth supplied instead. "We would *love* to understand the cultural progress your society has made to reach this point."

Mrellin smiled; she knew how much they loved to learn about other cultures, and could practically feel their excitement rising.

"Of course!" said Aylin. "That's what I'm here for."

Their guide shook herself, and then continued.

"Or… was, I suppose. Atlantis was founded over nine hundred years ago, following Expedition Unknown — more properly the Lost Voyage, if you believe the Bettles alphabetic translation, but popularised as 'Expedition Unknown' by the movie of the same name released in the third century — which was an exodus from a dying planet, the home of the human race, following a catastrophic climate —"

The watch flashed warning-orange.

"— well, following some manner of disaster, the cause of which is not clear. Our ancestors then found their way here aboard the starship *Gela*, settling this new world with the help of the native Sea People — more properly, the Achemenidians. Soon, with their help, our ancestors were able to establish mystic rituals that resulted in great power, now understood to be an early form of the technology that still powers our society today."

She flexed a hand, showing off her amphibious skin, as she continued:

"Centuries of cross-breeding and adaptation have granted aquatic features akin to the Sea People's to all our people, who have followed the example of the mythical utopia of Atlantis in our political structure and social norms. Sadly, it is believed there are very few, if any, of the original Sea People left, due to…"

Aylin coughed, glancing for the briefest instant towards the watch.

"…Well, a variety of unknown factors," she said carefully. "At any rate, we left that rather uncivilised era behind following the first of the Great Disasters, which resulted in a change in policy, towards keeping outsiders from interfering in our business, and our third era is now orientated towards protecting our glorious homeland, the first city, from the kinds of invasions from opposing Kings in the Federation that led to the second disaster. Apologies, would you mind if I paused for a moment?"

Aylin stepped towards a vending machine outside another workplace-styled structure. This one had a repeating GIF of a splash on the front; a water dispenser, presumably.

"If any of you need to use the bathroom while you wait," she added, hands folded politely together, "some of the new public bathrooms are just behind me."

Nardeth looked over their shoulder to see a small, thankfully opaque, dome with two doors. They recognised the symbols from their studies of the more close-minded eras of human history; one door had the silhouette of someone in a suit, painted blue, while the other had a pink silhouette of someone with long hair, wearing a dress. Segregated bathrooms with only two options.

Nardeth could feel their hearts racing; they found themself looking into a metal pillar, staring at their reflection and analysing every detail of their current corporeal vessel. *This body's hair is long, does that mean I'm a woman? But my voice is not very high, and I'm certainly not wearing a dress. I have to shave regularly, does that make me a man? But I have a larger chest than most men…* As they were spiralling, Mrellin stepped towards them, taking their hand.

"We don't have to stay," she whispered softly, but they shook their head, still trying to work out how they were supposed to *fit*.

Zerlan, who had noticed the signs too, turned back to Aylin and asked tentatively: "Are those gender-specific bathrooms?"

Aylin turned towards zir, biting her lip nervously. "Sex-segregated, yes. Do you know of another kind in Human space?"

"Pink is for women and blue is for men, correct? So, does your society not make space for those who are neither?"

"Well, there used to be bespoke facilities for *extraterrestrial* lifeforms with nonstandard anatomical features, but they have been pared down for lack of use," said Aylin.

A wordless understanding passed between the Lightbringers that clarifying their own nonhuman origins might be more trouble than it was worth.

"As for Earth-descended lifeforms like ourselves…" The guide's words were clipped, but her face was soft, sympathetic. "The Royal Advisory Board holds that there is no such thing as third genders among the Human Race. Our public spaces —" there didn't seem to be any other kind of spaces here, the crew of the *Zadellin* had noticed, "— reflect only biological truth, not any sort of ideology." Aylin's voice shook as she finished: "Every citizen of Atlantis must conform."

But what bathroom am I *supposed to use?* Nardeth wondered. Aylin shook her head as if she could hear them, but didn't answer, and turned back towards the vending machine. She inserted a token and pressed a button on her watch, but then — the machine flashed orange.

"Support for non-conformity detected", a robotic voice rang out. Aylin cringed at the volume, broadcasting to anyone within a block who cared to listen. *"Privileges withheld until the situation is rectified."*

"No, no, I'm conforming —" she whispered with desperation, "look, my hair's long now, no-one's causing any trouble — come on, *please*!"

But the colour didn't change. It matched her watch.

Slowly, still breathing heavily, Nardeth stepped towards her. *Do it scared, if that's what it takes.*

"Here," they said, and offered her their own bottle.

She looked unsure, but took it gratefully. The watch screen bloomed a dark red; she handed the bottle back hastily, and then led the crew further into the city.

As they walked, Mrellin couldn't stop looking behind her; some prickle on the back of her neck, some sense of an emotion beyond the little group of four whose owner she couldn't quite see. She tried to shake it off; it wasn't like she *wasn't* being watched in this city, not with all the cameras. Fear is only paranoia until you're right.

* * *

"Oh joy," Draven commented, sliding between two pillars. "All the local primitives share the new boss's dress sense."

"Could be worse," Correhnon responded, kos lanky form quickly settling beside him to watch the passing grey-clad masses. "'At least, this way, these new uniforms help us blend in. Mind you, I'm not thrilled with how exposed we are out here — certainly makes it hard for our quarry not to spot us, grey or not. And *we're* too far away to recognise anyone from here. …Besides, what do they look like again? Assuming they haven't recorporated on the sly."

Kos partner sighed.

"We'd have *detected* that. Did that knock on your head erase *all* your training? Look —" he pointed as subtly as he could to a pillar a little further away. Correhnon could just make out a head of mid-length, dark blond hair before it whisked back out of sight. "You see? The three rogues are just around that corner. If we can bring them back to the Watch, my department will have them squawking like a canary before you can say —"

"Processing, you mean," Correhnon narrowed kos eyes, turning towards Draven. "Under Jillian's new rules, arrested individuals are to be processed in accordance with the Cathedral Guard's regulations before being passed on, if need be, to the Department of Information."

"… Right, of course," Draven replied slowly.

Correhnon may have lost some time after kos last death and recorporation, but Draven was quickly realising that it didn't mean ko was stupid, or that ko would just let Draven get away with whatever he wanted. They could end up at cross-purposes all too easily… that was something Draven would have to keep an eye on. Once he'd caught the runaways, that was.

* * *

Aylin continued showing them around the city. Everywhere they went, they saw people working, bent over food processors and sewing machines, all with small glowing watches attached to their wrists. When they reached a hospital, Zerlan insisted on looking in, on seeing the way the Atlanteans used their magic, but all ze saw was the same machines he'd see on any human colony — heart monitors beeping their steady rhythms robotically as if this were no Atlantis at all. Ze sunk back, disappointed.

"I thought you had relics that sensed problems, and rituals that healed them, but this is just… normal."

"Ah. I see. Your view of Atlantean society is *quite* outdated," Aylin remonstrated. "We used such methods in the First Era, with high success rates for recovery from all manner of ailments, but cures don't make money. Look up," she told them, "and you can see an example of the way those ideas are still incorporated into our technology today."

Above the hospital was a block, and on that block was a light screen, showcasing something that looked like a blood pressure cuff. Plastic, likely. The screen promised low prices and a machine that tested for illness using a mechanism 'based on the old ways', with comparable success rates.

"But — hang on, why can't you just use the old ways, if they're comparable? Environmental reactions, right? The Land would tell you what's wrong — I don't understand what changed," Zerlan complained.

"Society progressed. The old ways were unscientific," Aylin told him.

Zerlan shook his head. "I read papers on this place, before we came. Your methods may have been referred to as magic by some, but they were tested

and replicable, even if they were difficult to understand by outsiders — that's not unscientific at all."

"Land is free. There are greedy people on every planet," Nardeth replied. "Atlantis probably started using money when the tourists came in, and without them, needed to invent a way to keep the money in circulation. Keep some people richer than others."

"So they can pick and choose who gets water and medical supplies?" Zerlan shook zir head. "And who gets to exist in public spaces. I don't like it here. Atlantis isn't what I thought."

Aylin reached out a hand. "Wait — there is one more area I would like to show you, before you leave. Give me one more chance to prove that our world is moving in the right direction. I wouldn't want you to leave with a bad impression."

Mrellin looked at Nardeth expectantly.

"I'll stay if Zerlan wants to," they told her.

The group turned to Zerlan, who shrugged.

"One more can't hurt, I suppose."

Aylin smiled. "Follow me."

Winding their way back through the city, the weary group eventually reached a slightly covered area, lit through a skylight that bored into glass, which in turn dipped down to the ground in a thinning tunnel, light scattering out from the centre. The walls were like a massive blanket, draped over the area, and made from something like bamboo, only more malleable. Inside there was a hush, a kind of special quiet that drew you in and made you want to stay. Despite the light from the central, hollow column, it seemed to grow a little darker when they stepped inside — Mrellin, suspicious already, was the first to notice. She turned to Aylin, but quickly realised why the change had occurred without needing to ask.

"Your watch. It stopped glowing."

Mrellin stared at the Atlantean. Aylin breathed a sigh of relief, face breaking into a smile.

"This museum-space holds some of the most sacred relics allowed to be on display, many of which are sensitive to wireless signals — the wrist monitors run off a feedback loop, so, when they can no longer transmit out, they stop collecting, too. Saves money, I believe. It's always about money," she reflected bitterly. "But, that's why I needed to bring you here."

Mrellin backed away so she was between her crew and the alien, just in case. "Are you saying… whoever was listening, through your watch, they can't hear us?"

Aylin shook her head. "It's not like that — they don't need people. That's what's so scary. In my grandparents' day, our world was in the middle of a transformation, and the Advisors, they sided with the growing corporate world. They turned us into a commodity; our time is bought and sold, where before, it was treasured for its own merit. People had value."

She sighed.

"And then, the dawn came. The new era. And suddenly, the old ways were confined to museums, and poor copies installed in their place, blocked behind paywalls that could only be removed through work, and that work creates more bad copies to be bought and sold… it's an endless cycle, and you can't leave, because it's the whole world. No one is listening. No one *is needed* to listen, but we are heard anyway. If it didn't make me feel so trapped, I'd almost call it —"

"Magic?" Zerlan suggested.

He and Nardeth had been reading a book behind a glass case, propped open on a page detailing the fall of the First Era. *Not too early, then; too late.* He kept turning his head, as if he could hear someone, calling to him through the lofts and folds.

"Or, as we'd call it, an artificial intelligence program that sends out a signal when it detects certain… not words, is it? There's no listening device. That

wouldn't make you *this* uncomfortable. Is it your physiological reactions, your heartbeat? No, that could change for too many reasons."

Aylin cocked her head to one side. "You *are* clever. We were taught that only Atlanteans could understand why things had to be this way, but… there's something in you. Something familiar."

"We are nothing like you," Nardeth insisted, affronted, and Zerlan nudged them in the ribs. "Ow!"

"That's one credit in the racial supremacy jar from you when we get back to *Zads*," he joked, before turning back to the tour guide. "So, what is it about us, then, that's familiar, and that is used to track your activity?"

"I know it's strong in you *because* it exists in us," Aylin responded. "Our minds. Our *emotions*."

"You're telepathic?" Mrellin asked. Aylin cringed.

"That is your word for it, yes, that or 'magic'. But we think of ourselves as simply *sensitive*. It's thought to be an adaptation to the climate, or from our centuries of cross-breeding — unable to communicate effectively under water, our ancestors developed a higher level of communication, beyond speech."

Zerlan nodded, approving, though ze seemed distracted, probably by one of the marvels on display. This was not uncommon for Zerlan, and so Mrellin was used to it, and knew not to bring attention to it, so he wouldn't get defensive. For a Lightbringer, he could act quite like an ordinary mortal.

"Well, your suspicion is correct — our species certainly has heightened telepathic abilities. I wonder why we didn't sense something similar in you?"

Mrellin regarded the guide with suspicion. There was still so much about this world that made no sense: the purpose of the constant surveillance, the prickling feeling at the back of her neck telling her she was still being watched, the question of how this world had undergone such sudden shifts… And there was something else, something scratching at the back of her mind. Something calling to her, asking her to… to…

"Have you seen this?" Zerlan called from behind a fold of wall.

The others joined him, crowding around the dais that supported some artifact of a bygone, more wondrous era, to see the object of his focus. Tucked into the descriptive plaque was a flash of something blue.

"Aylin, weren't you looking at something like this when we met you?" She nodded.

"Oh! That's the latest Blue Paper," said the guide, voice dropping down to a whisper — but an elated one. "It's this… periodical, this little magazine. Issues get dropped by a mysterious group linked to a whole bunch of anti-authoritarian projects, all across the city. Call themselves the 'Blue Paper Routers'. Even in here, it's best not to talk about them, but their message is known all over the city. The Blue Papers are scattered everywhere — I always find there's a copy exactly where I need one. We're not exactly supposed to be reading them, though, so, do be careful."

Mrellin took a step forward. "And… what happens if we're not careful? What happens to people who don't conform? Systems crumble, Kings are overthrown — why hasn't that happened here?"

At her questioning, Aylin began to back away. Zerlan was still examining the magazine, and the contents of the display case, so it fell to Nardeth to move and pull Mrellin back.

"What are you, a snitch?" said Aylin, reproachfully, as the wordless threat vanished. "You shouldn't ask too many questions," she whispered. "Could get people into a heap of trouble."

She checked her watch, her own words reminding her of something she'd forgotten, but the screen remained firmly unlit.

"I promise, we're just curious," Nardeth insisted. "We have no business here, and no quarrel with you and yours."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Zerlan piped up. "Did you read the inscription?"

Mrellin snapped her head around. "You know we didn't — you're holding the only copy around."

Zerlan shook his head. "No, not the zine — the inscription on this plaque. It's… calling to me." *And the voice sounds like an old friend.* "And I think I know why. Bringer of Dawn, this thing's called. It ushers in new beginnings."

"Or endings," Aylin began. "That's the Eos-Phoros, the Finisher of Eras. Used to construct things — entities — using light. It was used in the legends to awaken giants and animate creatures made of clay, to protect and shape our land. My father used to tell me stories at bedtime of ancient golems, raised by the Eos-Phoros to protect small villages from the ravages of war."

The object looked like an old stone camera, or a projector, perhaps, a little larger than an average person's chest. Aylin was taking great care not to stand too close.

"Upon activation, the light pours through the reel and is transformed, giving life to the object of the lens. The first disaster came when the device was used to bring life to an army of golems, to do our work for us. They were told to fell trees to create a dam, but they never stopped, and all our trees were chopped down. We had none left, and our land ended up flooding, not despite our efforts, but because of them. When we then had no crops, we traded with foreign empires, but these empires required money and money leads to fighting. Soon, we were embroiled in a war, and we had to bring forth a giant creature from the depths of the ocean, who shot like a squid and destroyed ships like a squid that was very, very large. The giants and unicorns and golems and Kraken… my people have learned our lesson. Perhaps it is wise to keep some things in cages," she finished, turning away.

"I think we're here for a reason after all. This world is broken, and we have to fix it. Listen to the *name*, Aylin," Zerlan called, thoughts still half with the voice of another machine that had tried to lead him on a certain path.

He still had no idea where that would end, but there was only one way to find out.

"Your world is not lost," Zerland continued. "I think we are supposed to help you set things right. Because the name, Eos-Phoros? Literally, Bringer of Dawn, or Bringer of Light. Don't you see? That's what we are. My friends and I. I'm sorry we didn't tell you, but we aren't human at all. This device was engineered to broadcast a call to the Gods of the Morning Star, our

ancestors, the beings who brought a new dawn to the universe. It was made to summon *us*. And here we *are*! It *worked*!"

Zerlan was breathless by the end of zir speech, giddy and excited for the first time since entering the city. The others looked at zir, a mix of bewilderment and confusion on their faces. Nardeth had chosen the destination themself — what could be powerful enough to draw them there, to make them choose to come without even realising that they had been influenced? And… why were they, three random runaways, somehow so central and *important* to an entire planet?

"That sounds a bit self-absorbed, don't you think?" came a voice from the shadows, making Nardeth jump. "You aren't the centre of the universe."

"Well, astronomically speaking if nothing else, the Morning Star *is* fairly central to —" A sharp glare from Mrellin stopped Nardeth's muttering.

"Not the time," she snapped. "Sorry, they — *my friend* gets a little carried away sometimes. So, who are you?"

The figure stepped towards the central column, allowing the light to pour over their face. Their hair was an unnatural shock of blue, and their skin a light mauve. They had several piercings, and their androgynous features made them stand out, as did their short, dyed hair; it made them seem… out of place. Non-conforming.

If difference was dangerous, then who would be seen as the greater risk: the aliens who naturally had no place in this world, or the native who knew exactly how much they stood out? In the end, it probably wouldn't matter — all that would be seen, either way, was a threat.

"Roe, what are you doing here?" Aylin hurried forward, pulling the newcomer to one side. "You can't be here while I'm working!"

Roe scoffed. "The museum's safe, we'll be fine — it's the only truly private space left in Atlantis. Besides, it couldn't wait until you got off work. Ay, something's going down, and we need to be there. Now."

"In broad daylight?" Aylin looked back over her shoulder at the Lightbringers, who were pretending not to listen. She raised her voice so they

could hear: "Whatever it is, it can wait until after the tour. These fine ladies and gentlemen don't need to —"

"We can stay here," Mrellin suggested. "You go, take care of whatever's happening. Not like we could tear him away from his tech —" she pointed a thumb at Zerlan, who was still poring hungrily over the Eos-Phoros — "so we won't be going anywhere."

"But — I can't leave you here alone. That's not how —"

"It'll be fine," Roe insisted. "There's plenty here to keep three tourists occupied. Now, let's go! It's too dangerous if I go alone."

They grabbed Aylin's hand and ran out of the museum, stopping only to nod approvingly at Zerlan, who was still holding the blue pamphlet. Mrellin noticed that they were not wearing a watch.

The trio shared a look — two of them did, at any rate; Zerlan was still muttering to zirself about the machine — and soon, they came to a quick decision.

"We're not going to stay here, are we?" Nardeth asked. Mrellin shook her head.

"First interesting thing to happen since we arrived. Come on!"

She grabbed Zerlan's hand and followed Aylin and Roe, ignoring Zerlan's protests that the Eos-Phoros was very interesting, thank you very much.

They tore through the streets, sticking to walls where they could to avoid being too obtrusive in the quiet of the city, hot on Roe's trail. They watched as Roe pulled another blue pamphlet from their pocket, tearing off a corner and slipping it between Aylin's watch and her skin. There was something ahead of them, something that looked like a van whose design was made up entirely of rounded segments with no angles or edges — hovering half a foot in the air. It was moving, faster and faster, and neither Roe and Aylin, nor their Lightbringer pursuers, could keep up.

If Nardeth had known that they were being watched in turn, that their old colleagues were chasing them too, struggling to keep them in sight, they

might have gotten a laugh out of imagining their breathlessness, but as it was, they were the one struggling, and the burning of their lungs were enough to fill their mind. Wincing as their knees stung with every step, they pulled themself along with their staff, hoping that the van would stop soon.

"They've been chasing that journalist who wrote an article about us, Perina-something," Roe was telling Aylin when they finally stopped running, crouching a little ways off from where the vehicle had trundled to a halt. "She's been running, trying not to stay in the same place too long in case the king's guard decided she was a threat, but I think they've finally tracked her down."

They brought out a small oblong object with a lens on one side and a screen on the other. A camera. They started filming as two uniformed men with what looked like cattle prods strapped to their legs exited the van, making their way towards a small curled wave of some transparent material, under which sat a couple desks. At one of them was a woman with a knot of brown hair tossed over one shoulder, who was backing away. Soon, she had backed into the wave behind her, and had nowhere to run.

There were people at the desks around her, and walking nearby. A few turned towards her, but no one came to her assistance. They just watched.

"Can't we *do* something?"

Roe jumped at Zerlan's voice. The trio had crouched out of sight behind Roe when they caught up, not wanting to be seen by the people in the van.

"We're not lawyers. Only they can be involved in an arrest — anything else is considered obstruction. We'd just get ourselves nicked too, and that won't help anyone," Roe explained, getting over their sudden appearance quickly. "For now, the best we can do is bear witness."

There was no time to intervene; the woman was bundled into the van within two minutes flat, the doors swinging shut behind her. Nardeth caught sight of her face; tears streamed down her cheeks. They turned to their left; Mrellin was crying, too. She bit her lip, then clenched her fists before standing up — Nardeth knew what she would do a second before she

moved. They reached for her arm to pull her back, but she was already storming towards the van.

"Hey! Hey, you in there, do you have reasonable cause to arrest that woman?"

"Oh, carp," Aylin muttered.

Roe stood up and went after Mrellin. Nardeth couldn't quite make out what they were saying, but it looked like Mrellin was trying to talk to a guard who was studiously ignoring her. Finally, he turned to face her, and Nardeth could hear the words as if they'd been whispered into their ear —

"Stay out of our way, or you're next."

The van drove off before Mrellin could do anything else, too fast to follow for more than a few seconds, after which Roe stashed their camera. People were beginning to stare — not at the departing van, but at *them*. Unnatural cotton-candy pink hair in broad daylight? Foreign tongues and no coral antennae? She was the odd one out, she realised. Odder even than Roe. She glared at the assembled crowd. If you had a crowd's unwanted attention, *use* it before *they* beat you with it. Basic training. She only had time to say one thing.

"You could have done something," she spat

And then Roe was leading her away, the moment over. The pair darted between walls and pillars until they found somewhere marginally more secluded, where they were joined by Aylin, Nardeth, and Zerlan. Nardeth shook their head while Zerlan praised Mrellin for her bravery; Aylin and Roe spoke in hushed whispers and furtive glances.

"Look, this place, it's broken. Worlds aren't meant to regress," Zerlan was saying, "and clearly, we're meant to do something about it. So, let's go back to the museum. Or, maybe we could get an audience with the King, or find where that journalist went, or…"

"None of that will help," Roe told him. "You are *quite* right. Our world didn't use to be like this. But a nice chat with the man who changed everything, *that* isn't going to fix it, believe. There are people trying, though. Maybe you'd like to meet them?"

* * *

Draven and Correhnon had been walking for quite some time, hot on the trail of their adversaries, when they reached an archway. On one side was a kind of giant net with bulging pockets set into each hole; a bunch of grapes, or the underside of a lung. On the other was a group of uniformed men leaning against a rounded van, watching over the net. As the pair approached, one of the guards stepped forward, one arm out towards them.

"What's your business here?" he asked as soon as they were close enough.

Draven rolled his eyes, but responded that they were 'just visiting'. This clearly wasn't a good enough answer, and soon, they were half surrounded by a semicircle of hulking soldiers.

After a brief stand-off, Correhnon finally admitted that they were with 'law enforcement', which received a round of guffaws.

"Law *enforcement*? You look more like law-breakers to me. Non-conformists. Oh, go on. Spit it out. Are you proper rebels, or did you just fancy lying to the city's sworn protectors? What is this, a dare, intoxication?"

The man closest to Correhnon grinned menacingly. Ko swallowed.

"We don't want any trouble; just let us keep tracking our quarry, and no one has to get hurt."

"You, hurt *us*?" the guard repeated, torn between outrage and hilarity. "Threatening a guard — that's a good few months in a detention facility."

"Come on kid, better leave before we have to take drastic measures."

Draven stepped forward. "My partner *is* weird, I'll grant you, but not a threat. We just —"

"Your *partner*? And what do you mean by *that*, then?" The guard's eyes narrowed, and he swatted at a lock of Draven's hair, making the Watcher wince. "Your hair's too long for a law-abiding male, citizen. I figured I'd just pack you two off with a warning to get a haircut before the announcement tomorrow — but just what are you supposed to be? Are you a man at all?"

"I *am* a man! I am a man with a job to do, and —"

The argument went on for a little longer, but it was clear they wouldn't be allowed to pass. Eventually, Correhnon grew tired of discussing human customs, and tried to move through the line of guards.

Consequently, one of them clocked kom in the face.

Ko reeled back, not used to such vulgar forms of fighting — *physical* violence, indeed! Draven took a swing, but by the time he had pushed himself free of the resulting hubbub, Correhnon was nowhere to be seen. A few of the guards had disappeared, too, and then Draven heard an engine start.

Cursing, he looked back at the archway he'd seen the runaways slip around only ten minutes before, and then turned and frowned at the departing vehicle.

* * *

The day was growing dark by the time their little band arrived. They were standing before a tinted dome, half hidden behind a cluster of pillars that supported a curved building of some sort. Roe knocked at the top of a doorway blocked by a cabinet of some kind, which was soon pushed out of the way to allow the group entry. Looking around curiously, the trio found themselves inside a massive upside-down bowl, partitioned off into sections by curtains hanging from the top. Along the wall of one such section ran a shelving unit, stacked with blue pamphlets. The opposite section had several bubbling holes secreted in the floor, out of which steam was rising.

A green-skinned Atlantean was bent over the divots, pouring mulch into the steam and extracting paper from the largest, non-steaming hole. Every few seconds, they would stop to rake smooth something at their feet.

"Welcome," announced Roe, "to the resistance."

Mrellin wandered to the wall and picked up a pamphlet.

"These are the same ones that have been scattered all over the city," she remarked. "So, that makes you the Blue Paper Routers."

Aylin slipped off into another section while Zerlan busied zirself with trying to engage in conversation with a tuxedo cat that was licking its paws by the door. The ground-press puffed away behind Roe as they grinned at Mrellin.

"What gave us away?"

The Blue Papers, the trio were soon told, were so named because they expressed a desire to return to honouring the environment. Which was, on such an oceanic world, mostly blue. The need for change had united the group of outcasts, their anger bubbling over and transformed into something useful as they were pushed out of their lives by increasingly restrictive rules. Some, like Roe, had moved out of the city entirely, sent into exile and sneaking in only when they could. Others, like Aylin, tried to blend in, to stay as safe as possible.

"Although I wouldn't make that decision myself, I respect him for it," Roe told the group, subtly emphasising the pronoun. "It isn't safe for him to be himself, and it isn't always possible to abandon everything you know for that chance."

The blue papers told their stories, and held space for their words, words that couldn't be spoken in the open anymore. On the ground, more zines were being brought into existence with every hiss of steam; intentions swirled amongst speeches, words spoken into a hole in the ground and became transformed into something physical, something *magical*.

Not everyone had abandoned the old ways.

Roe was in the midst of telling the trio the story of an effort to restore the original colour of the ancient buildings that surrounded them, too long neglected — a kind of goodwill vandalism — when Mrellin shot up suddenly, moving towards the door.

"What's wrong?" Nardeth called, and she held up a finger.

"Quiet… I think… the mood is shifting outside. There's someone close by, and they're getting closer. How secure is this place?"

Roe stood up too, looking over at Nauro, the man working on producing the Blue Papers. He stopped, willing the ground-press to do the same. Soon, the entire dome was quiet.

"Were you followed?"

Nardeth shook their head.

"Are you *sure*?"

But, there was no more time for interrogation, as the sound of heavy boots drew to a stop. The dome waited in tense silence. Finally, there was a quick and insistent tapping on the cabinet that was playing the part of a door, and everyone inside held their breaths.

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The story will continue in
Part Two of "With Love and Rage, The Blue Paper Routers":
"The Blue Paper Routers".

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